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H.M. MASSIMO

ICON IN THE INTERVAL: NISHIDA TADASHIGE

figs. 1-41; pls.i-xx

INTRODUCTION

In the long and distinguished lineage of the Japanese woodblock print, or mokuhanga, the contemporary master Nishida Tadashige (b. 1942) has carved a unique and resonant niche. He has taken one of art history's most familiar subjects—the domestic cat—and transformed it into a potent, stylized icon of modernity. While depictions of animals are deeply woven into the fabric of Japanese art, Tadashige's felines are distinctly contemporary creations. They are less the product of sentimental observation and more a profound study in form, presence, and graphic power. Through his masterful synthesis of traditional woodblock techniques, the philosophical principles of Japanese aesthetics, and a modern, almost Pop Art sensibility, he elevates his subject from a household pet to an emblem of self-possession and enigmatic consciousness. Tadashige's work is not merely about cats; it is a sophisticated investigation into the nature of seeing, being, and dwelling in the modern world. His genius lies in his ability to situate this investigation within the energized void of the print itself, using the ancient Japanese concept of Ma—the meaningful interval—to create a contemplative space where a silent, powerful dialogue unfolds between the viewer and the viewed. To fully appreciate the innovation of Nishida's art, one must first understand the revolutionary schism that redefined Japanese printmaking in the twentieth century

The preceding Edo Period (1603-1868) was dominated by ukiyo-e, or "pictures of the floating world." This was a highly sophisticated commercial art form built on a collaborative four-part system: the publisher (hanmoto) who financed and directed the project; the artist (eshi) who drew the master design; the carver (horishi) who chiseled the image into woodblocks; and the printer (surishi) who applied the colors. This system produced masterpieces of astonishing beauty but positioned the artist as one craftsman among many. With the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan opened to the West and underwent rapid industrialization, leading to the decline of this traditional craft. In its wake, two competing philosophies emerged. The shin hanga ("new prints") movement, championed by the publisher Watanabe Shōzaburō, sought to revive the collaborative system for a modern age. It combined the flawless technique of the old masters with nostalgic, romanticized subjects—serene temples, beautiful women, picturesque landscapes—largely catering to a burgeoning market of Western collectors. In direct opposition stood the sōsaku hanga ("creative prints") movement. Born from a Western-influenced desire for individual artistic expression, its creed was jiga, jikoku, jizuri—self-drawn, self-carved, and self-printed

Fig. i Pose 13 - White Cat

Its pioneers rejected the division of labor, insisting that the true artwork embodied the singular vision and physical touch of its creator at every stage. For them, the print was not a flawless reproduction of a drawing, but an original work of art in which the texture of the wood, the mark of the carving knife, and the variations in printing were essential expressive elements. After struggling for decades, the movement found crucial support among American patrons during the post-war occupation, who saw in its emphasis on individual creativity a reflection of democratic ideals. It was this tradition of the artist as sole, autonomous creator that Nishida Tadashige would inherit and ultimately redefine.

Nishida's own artistic journey reflects the cultural crossroads of post-war Japan. Born in 1942, he began his career not as a printmaker but as a painter, studying at Chiba University and winning accolades for his oil paintings in the 1960s. This early immersion in a Western medium was formative. His post-graduate studies took him to Europe and the United States, exposing him directly to the currents of international modernism, from the bold abstractions of Expressionism to the graphic immediacy of Pop Art. When he returned to Japan and, in the 1980s, made a deliberate shift to woodblock printing, it was not a retreat into tradition but a conscious synthesis. He chose the medium of mokuhanga but embraced the philosophy of sōsaku hanga, taking complete personal control over the entire creative process. This decision allowed him to fuse the disciplined techniques of a traditional Japanese craft with the aesthetic vocabulary of a global modernist.

The most striking feature of Tadashige's method is its radical simplification. He renders his cats with bold, fluid outlines and flat planes of deeply saturated color, stripping away extraneous detail to focus on the essential form and gesture. This minimalist approach is dramatically amplified by his treatment of the background. His subjects are rarely situated in a recognizable domestic space. Instead, they are placed against vast, unadorned fields of shimmering gold leaf, metallic silver, or stark, flat color. This is not mere decoration; it is a strategic and philosophical deployment of negative space. In Japanese aesthetics, this concept is known as Ma, a term that signifies far more than simple emptiness.

Fig. 2 Various Cats 28/150 2014

Fig. 3 Action 101/150 2006

In Japanese aesthetics, this concept is known as Ma, a term that signifies far more than simple emptiness. Ma is the active, energized interval—the pause between musical notes that creates rhythm, the space between two objects that defines their relationship, the silence in a conversation that carries more weight than words. It is a "pregnant nothingness" from

By placing his solitary cats within this field of pure Ma, Tadashige performs a powerful act of de-contextualization. He removes the animal from the everyday world of narrative and accessory, and places it within a contemplative, abstract arena. The cat is no longer simply a cat in a room; it is an existential presence occupying a carefully defined space-time. The shimmering, non-representational backgrounds deny the viewer any narrative foothold, forcing a direct and unfiltered encounter with the subject itself.

This confrontation is intensified and brought to its full power by Tadashige's masterful manipulation of the gaze. His cats are not passive objects of our observation; they are active subjects who look back. They often stare directly out of the frame, their luminous, meticulously rendered eyes creating a piercing point of connection that can be both engaging and unnerving. In a work like Black Cat Looking Back, the creature's body is a sinuous curve of pure black, but its head is turned, its wide, brilliant eyes fixing the viewer in a moment of suspended animation. This is not the blank look of an animal, but a gaze that seems to possess intention and consciousness. It challenges the viewer's detached position, transforming the act of looking into a reciprocal event. The print becomes a stage for an intersubjective encounter—a silent meeting between two consciousnesses.

Fig. 4 Caberg Taking a Rest 1986

By combining this powerful, reciprocal gaze with his bold, graphic style and his philosophical use of space, Nishida Tadashige moves far beyond simple portraiture. His cats become stylized icons of self-possession, solitude, and the inscrutable nature of non-human consciousness. They embody a distinctly modern sensibility. While historical artists like Utagawa Kuniyoshi famously depicted cats with anthropomorphic charm and playful narrative energy, Tadashige's felines are defined by their quiet, monumental stillness and psychological weight. They are emblems of a modern condition, reflecting a world where urbanization and changing family structures have elevated the pet to a primary companion, a silent witness to our solitary lives.

This modern sensibility has also brought Tadashige significant commercial success, a fact that places him in an interesting relationship with the legacy of sōsaku hanga. His graphic clarity and popular subject matter have a clear affinity with Pop Art, and his work has been featured on everything from bank calendars to major international exhibitions. Some might see this as a departure from the anti-commercial, high-modernist ideals of the early "creative print" pioneers. However, it can also be seen as the movement's logical evolution. The very international patronage that championed sōsaku hanga created a market for accessible, aesthetically pleasing modern art that was still identifiably "Japanese." Nishida has masterfully navigated this reality. By retaining absolute artistic control in the spirit of sōsaku hanga, while creating work that thrives in a commercial gallery system, he has found a way to bring his singular vision to a broad, global audience. In doing so, he has created a new chapter in the ongoing story of the Japanese print, proving that the soul of this ancient medium continues to find new and powerful forms of expression in the hands of its contemporary masters.